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Making the Garden Safe for Democracy

By Jeff Stein

FROM THE ROOFTOPS TO THE subway tunnels, from the Cuban communities across the Hudson to the FALN hangouts in the South Bronx, hundreds of federal agents, city police, and private security guards are sweeping for bombs, trailing kooks, psyching out terrorists, organizing credentials, and generally battenning down the city.

Outwardly, security officials project a deliberate attitude of calm about the Democratic National Convention here this week: This is our job; we are professionals; it's all a matter of carefully rehearsed routine. But in the quadrennial turbulence that passes for presidential politics in America, they also know that incidents of some kind are inevitable. The goal becomes simply: Carve four serene days in August out of the traveling show.

Planning for the convention began seven months ago, when representatives of various law-enforcement agencies began to meet with Democratic National Committee (DNC) security consultants Jim McDonnell and Rocky Pomerance to iron out duties and areas of physical responsibility. For the two Florida-based veterans it was just another convention; between them, they've handled a half-dozen national political conventions (both Democratic and Republican), five Super Bowls, ten Miss Universe Pageants, and the 1977 International Women's Year gathering in Houston.

McDonnell talks softly as he sits in his New York Statler office, across from the convention site, at Madison Square Garden. Two easels behind him display detailed charts of the Garden complex.

Ask him if he's worried about any-

thing happening and he talks about his team of 600 handpicked aides, managers, ushers, clerks, secretaries, and doormen. "I have people I trust." Ask him again and he passes out more laurels. "I'm working with a police force that knows what it's doing," he says with a smile.

FROM THE FIRST SECURITY meeting, in February, the most imposing challenge for officials has been to coordinate the complementary and often overlapping areas of authority. The DNC runs the convention, deciding who gets in and who doesn't, based on its power to issue credentials. The Secret Service protects the president, the candidates, and other designated public officials and their families. Even the CIA's worldwide cloak-and-dagger network is plugged into the system, with agents shadowing terrorists and cruising the convention for contacts among the diplomatic crowd. But the city, basically, belongs to the New York City police. They have the job of keeping the streets clear, the delegates moving, and the lid on.

NYPD Assistant Police Chief Joseph Preiss says he's fielding a force of some 2,300 uniformed officers for the convention detail and "over a hundred" plainclothes detectives for inside the Garden. A friendly, white-haired man, he talks fondly "of what I like to call my 'special forces.'" These are his troops with "heavy weapons"—shot-

guns, sniper rifles, and tear gas. They can be moved around rapidly by helicopter. Months ago, the police made a map of rooftops around the convention site and are putting sentries on them when the delegates move to and from the Garden and when the president comes and goes.

Another part of the chief's force is working underwater, with frogmen inspecting the heliport piers where the president's helicopter might land. Other police are monitoring the subway tunnels, rail lines, air ducts, and utility terminals around the convention complex. When key guards have to move, four closed-circuit television monitors pick up the watch from the NYPD's on-site command center in a dressing room of the Felt Forum. An on-site videotaping system will allow police to replay significant incidents.

OUTSIDE, OF COURSE, ARE the demonstrations. Jim McDonnell worries about the spark that could turn a peaceful crowd destructive, and promises an open channel of dialogue with protest leaders. "This is simply common sense," he says.

The police, meanwhile, talk about demonstrations matter-of-factly. "We'll keep them on Eighth Avenue, between 31st and 33rd streets, on the post-office side of the Garden," says a detective inspector. And if they overflow these blocks? "What we do then is move them toward Ninth Avenue," the detective says.

City police have also been leading the bomb sweeps. NYPD bomb experts say that since July 1 K-9 teams have been combing the subway entrances, air ducts, water, power, and communi-

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cation junctures. And a little-known, deserted catacomb of tunnels running beneath Eighth Avenue connecting the post office with the Garden. Seven bomb-sniffing dogs have been detailed for the convention; two are on-site around the clock. As the teams move through the Garden, color-coded seals are placed across secured closets, grates, and the nooks and crannies beneath the convention seating. Nearby outside, police are keeping ready their bomb truck, with its container made of woven bridge cable for transporting explosives.

SYSTEMS FOR CONTROLLING those authorized to move in and out of the Garden are the joint responsibility of all the security services. The NYPD has furnished X-ray machines and magnetometers to screen visitors for weapons and bombs. "There will be no way to get into the Garden without going through the machines," said a police official shortly before the convention opened.

Credentials issued by the DNC's subcommittee on accreditation, in conjunction with clearances from Madison Square Garden, the Secret Service, and the police, permit varying degrees of access to the convention site. All the ID's have been treated with a "chemical," according to Jim McDonnell, in order to set up yet another barrier to a skilled ID counterfeiter.

As for terrorists, security officials downplay the specter of trouble at the convention. The official stance may reflect an effort to protect intelligence operations against the groups. But the chief FBI expert on the FALN, a Puerto Rican nationalist group, discounts press reports that elaborate FALN plans to disrupt the convention have been found. The reports were "media hype," he says, prompted by the capture of crude notes in a raid last spring on an FALN hideout in New Jersey.

Other intelligence sources advanced a provocative notion to discount the prospect of incidents involving Omega 7, the anti-Castro exile terrorist group that took credit for one daylight murder and a half-dozen bombings in the metropolitan area last year. "They figure Reagan is going to be elected and will back them in a new campaign to topple Castro," a Justice Department source said. "So they're trying to be on their good behavior. Some are already training in the Everglades, others are calling up the CIA, or both."

THE SECRET SERVICE, MEAN-while, keeps tabs on about 400 individuals suspected of being possibly dangerous to the president or other public figures. In advance of a presidential visit, the special agents fan out to a target area and freshen their dossiers.

Sometimes they pay a rather sympathetic home visit to an individual known to be mentally disturbed. "Some of the same ones call us from time to time with some sort of a threat, but they really just want to talk to us," an agent explained. Other targets get different treatment. Those persons considered unstable, with a history of threats against the president, are put under round-the-clock surveillance.

Inside the hall, especially on the convention floor, the various security services are fielding as many as 300 undercover men and women. All security personnel are supposed to be able to identify one another—even if the layman can't—by special lapel buttons or other insignia, according to Secret Service agent Kevin Houlihan.

Sometimes, naturally, friction develops among the security services. There are little things. The NYPD likes wooden barricades for crowd control. The Secret Service likes barrels of water linked by rope. From time to time, local cops grumble about the snappily dressed, razor-cut boys who swagger around with plastic in their ears, close to the bigwigs, "as if they own the place," as one cop put it. But in general, relations seem to be smooth this year. "We need all the help we can get," said one police detective.

And the cost? The Secret Service expects to spend \$16 million for the entire campaign. A federal grant is supposed to cover the \$3.5 million the NYPD has budgeted for the convention, mostly in overtime pay; police officials worry, however, that lengthy floor fights may push costs beyond the amount of the grant. The DNC anticipates paying \$300,000 to \$400,000 for security. With luck, we'll never know for certain what the money bought.

"You can never know how many threats are stopped just because of the way we do things, our established routine," says Secret Service agent Larry Buendorf. "Nobody writes to tell us, 'You really stopped me last week; you sure did a good job.' Nobody tells us that."